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NORTH CHICAGO — Standing in the middle of a clean and modern, but vacant floor of in-patient rooms at the Veterans Administration Medical Center, Dr. Irving Garlovsky described one key gap in the care currently available to the 25,000 veterans who visit the facility each year.

"If we have a major surgical procedure, we have to send them to Hines VA, the West Side VA or Milwaukee," said Garlovsky, the North Chicago VA's chief of surgery. "A major procedure would be something like abdominal surgery, neurosurgery — anything that would require an overnight stay."

That scenario is scheduled to change as the Navy and Department of Defense move forward on a \$13 million expansion of the medical center, part of an ongoing \$160 million initiative to establish a federal ambulatory care center for not only retired military employees but also active naval personnel and dependents.

Renovation of the center's emergency room and construction of a new surgical area is slated to start early next year and be completed in late spring or early summer of 2006. At that time, the nearby Great Lakes Naval Hospital will shift all of its inpatient medicine, surgery and emergency room services to the North Chicago VA.

Eight new ER stations will be added to the six currently functioning at the VA, and four operating rooms with recovery room beds will be installed in space currently occupied by inpatient rooms.

"This is one of the most exciting projects that this medical center has been a part of in a long, long time," said North Chicago VA Medical Center Director Patrick Sullivan at a Tuesday press conference detailing the project.

Sullivan said the expansion plan "exceeds anything in the last 20 years" at the complex, which sits on the southeast corner of Route 137 and Green Bay Road, just west of the Navy hospital at Naval Station Great Lakes.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, a Naval Reserve officer who helped secure the funding, said establishment of a care center for both veterans and active Navy personnel is the first of its kind in the nation.

"The Air Force led the way at Nellis Air Force Base, but this is the lead Navy project," Kirk said. "This will provide better health care for active-duty Navy, better health care for their dependents and better health care for retired military personnel."

According to Sullivan, the North Chicago VA has seen its focus shift in recent years to primarily ambulatory care and same-day surgical procedures. But the number of veterans visiting increased from 22,000 in 2002 to 25,000 last year, and Sullivan said "we project the growth will continue through 2010."

Kirk said U.S. Census figures indicate more veterans are moving to the North Shore, with the figure expected to rise from 50,000 to 55,000 this decade. He added that establishing a federal care center will "ensure veteran health care in the northern suburbs in the foreseeable future."

Navy Capt. Michael Anderson, commanding officer of Naval Medical Station Great Lakes, said the combination of VA and naval facilities and the modernization plans will provide "the most efficient and best health care" for all involved.

"I have to say, this is something that a year, two years ago, we never thought we could achieve," said Anderson, describing the naval hospital as "a building with a great history, but it was built 50 years ago."

Other components of the overall \$160 million venture included shifting of the Navy's inpatient mental health unit to the VA in October 2003. Also in the works is construction of a \$1.3 million women's health clinic, and a pediatric care center for Navy dependents.